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DE RUEHSN #0321/01 0971954
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 071954Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0945
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE
RHMFIS/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000321

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/07/2029

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ETRD](#) [OVIP](#) [SHANNON](#) [ES](#)

SUBJECT: GOES DISCUSSES TRANSITION AND PATHWAYS WITH A/S SHANNON

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES ROBERT I. BLAU, REASONS 1.4(B,D)

Summary

¶11. (C) WHA Assistant Secretary Thomas Shannon held separate meetings March 18 with President Saca, Foreign Minister Marisol Argueta, President-elect Mauricio Funes and ARENA Presidential candidate Rodrigo Avila. He also attended several press conferences and a reception with private business sector representatives. This first of two cables on A/S Shannon's visit will focus on his meetings with President Saca and Foreign Minister Argueta. The second cable will focus on A/S Shannon's meetings with the winning and losing presidential candidates and business leaders. Both major parties have approached the election transition in a mature fashion, stating they wanted to work with one another. President Saca had already asked Funes to accompany him to a regional integration meeting and the Summit of the Americas and said that Funes would be welcome to join him at the March 30 meeting in Costa Rica with Vice President Biden. Foreign Minister Argueta pressed for high-level Department participation in the upcoming Pathways to Prosperity Ministerial and was very pleased with the news of getting a pull-aside meeting with the Secretary. End Summary.

Meeting Attendees

¶12. (U) Foreign Minister Marisol Argueta and President Saca's Private Secretary Elmer Charlaix attend the meeting with President Saca. Salvadoran Director General for Political Affairs Werner Romero and Director of Western Hemisphere Affairs Wendy Acevedo attended the meeting with the Foreign Minister. Charge Robert Blau and the Political and Economic Counselors attended all of the meetings with Assistant Secretary Shannon.

President Saca Meeting

¶13. (C) In their private meeting and subsequent statements to the press, Saca and A/S Shannon described the extensive and positive relationship between the USA and El Salvador. During the meeting, Saca instructed Foreign Minister Marisol Argueta to move forward with a five-year extension to the Cooperative Security Location (CSL) agreement at the air base in Comalapa. Saca and Argueta thought that the agreement could be expanded, including to other locations such as the ports in Acajutla and La Union, but agreed that the best approach would be to finalize the five-year extension before further discussions on expanding the role or locations for those operations. While he thought they could get FMLN to vote for the latter, Saca acknowledged that it was less certain.

¶4. (C) In a gentle, but clear, pitch for increased military assistance, Saca added that the GOES had essentially stopped investing in the Armed Forces when the civil war ended and would appreciate additional military support from the United States. Saca was very concerned about narco-trafficking in Mexico and Guatemala. He also urged movement on the El Salvador's extradition request for Hector Silva, noting his supposed links to narco-traffickers and the murder of several Salvadoran legislators to the Central American Parliament that occurred in 2007 in Guatemala.

¶5. (C) President Saca lamented not yet having an opportunity to speak with President Obama and looked forward to seeing him at the Summit of the Americas (SOA), noting that he had already asked President-elect Funes to attend the SOA with him. Saca said he had also invited Funes to an upcoming SICA (Central American Integration Secretariat) meeting in Managua. Saca's biggest worry about an FMLN presidential victory was Venezuela. He said the USG could serve as a good counterbalance to Chavez and his attempt to influence the new Funes administration. He hoped that Funes would move closer to Brazil and keep his distance from Venezuela.

¶6. (C) President Saca said he called Funes early Sunday night to congratulate him on his victory and that he had been impressed with Funes in their several subsequent conversations. He assured Funes that he wanted to work closely with him on the transition and would "open the government's books" to Funes and his team. Saca was reassured when Funes told him that he wanted nothing to do with Iran, was keeping his distance from Chavez and sought good relations with the United States. He was also relieved to hear that Funes was not interested in ALBA (the Chavez-inspired trade program) and that he wanted to continue some of the social programs that Saca had started, e.g., FOSALUD (healthcare), Red Solidaria (healthcare and education focused on the very poor) and Plan 2021 (education). Saca also noted that ARENA had the second largest bloc in the Legislative Assembly (32 of the 84 seats) and had just won the mayoral race in the capital San Salvador, thus the FMLN will need to work with ARENA and vice versa.

¶7. (C) Saca said he worried about the current economic situation; exports and remittances were down, and the worldwide financial situation was taking its toll on the country. A/S Shannon said the March 30 meeting with Vice President Biden would be a good chance to express those concerns. He explained that Vice President Biden was coming to listen to what the Central American Presidents had to say about economic conditions, the Merida initiative and whatever else was on their minds. A/S Shannon said at the SOA, they hoped to build upon discussions at the G-20, noting that five of the G-20 countries would be at the SOA. He added that the USG does not want to exclude anyone from these discussions, but we clearly want to work with those who want to work with us. He also encouraged Saca to bring along Funes to the meeting with Vice President Biden and the SOA, and Saca responded positively.

¶8. (C) On Cuba, the Foreign Minister Argueta said that Costa Rica decided to announce their opening of diplomatic relations with Cuba because they knew the FMLN would shortly do it and Costa Rica did not want to be the last country in Latin America to establish those relations. Saca acknowledged it was time to open relations with Cuba, noting that the Salvadoran airline TACA already flies there. He said that former Salvadoran President Flores looked into opening an interests section there, but shelved the idea when Castro verbally attacked him at an international forum. However, he and Argueta said that the USG should advise Funes to go slow in opening relations with Cuba. Saca added that the Cuban embargo was a "marvelous pretext for the Castros," suggesting it might be time for the USG to review that policy.

Foreign Minister Focuses on Pathways

¶9. (C) Foreign Minister Marisol Argueta was elated to hear

about her pull-aside meeting appointment with the Secretary.

She was eager to talk about the upcoming Salvadoran-hosted Pathways to Prosperity in the Americas (Pathways) Ministerial and wanted assurance of high-level USG participation, expressing strong hope that the Secretary would head the US delegation. She added that they could combine the Ministerial with a meeting of Vital Voices, a project that the Secretary had supported when she was First Lady. A/S Shannon explained that the USG was very interested in the Pathways concepts and was considering expanding it to include other countries, such as Brazil as well as emphasize the environmental and social development aspects of the initiative. Argueta embraced the ideas, adding that it was important to include small and medium enterprises in the process. Argueta mentioned April 28-29 or May 8-9 as possible dates for the Ministerial, but was flexible depending on the Secretary's schedule.

¶10. (C) A/S Shannon noted that the Secretary would be traveling to the SOA in April and that the June 1 Salvadoran Presidential Inauguration immediately preceded the OAS General Assembly meeting in neighboring Honduras. They also agreed to follow up on the extension of the CSL agreement and Argueta asked when funds from the Merida Initiative would start flowing to El Salvador. Argueta gave a brief tour of the Foreign Ministry's new facilities and held the first press conference in the building with A/S Shannon where they once again highlighted the strong and close relations between the two countries.

¶11. (U) The visit of A/S Shannon and President Obama's call to President-elect made front-page headlines in the nation's major newspapers and electronic media. It reinforced the image that the United States will continue to be the closest of ally of El Salvador even after the change of government.

¶12. (U) This cable has been cleared by Assistant Secretary Shannon.

BLAU